

The Gift

The Christ of Christmas

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Well, it's that time of year, of course, when many people are thinking of gifts. I just wanted to kind of circle our thoughts and gather our thoughts around the concept of a gift here this evening because what we have in Christ is God's supreme gift. Webster's New World Dictionary says that the English noun "gift" is "something given to show friendship, affection or support." A gift is something that is an expression of love, of kindness, of something given to another in a spirit of love. The dictionary goes on and it gives more than 20 definitions for the English verb "give," but the first listing states that a gift to give is "to turn over the possession of something to someone without cost." Someone gives you a gift, you give a gift to someone, you're handing over something that you intend for them to take possession of that costs them nothing. Well, this evening what we want to do in this brief time of devotion, we want to set aside the human concept of gifts, of Christmas, of what we think about at this time of year, and to take just a few moments to remember what God's gift to us has been like and what Scripture describes Christ and salvation and how in so many different places, so many different aspects of the believer's redemption is described in terms of a gift, of God giving, and I want to just take you to a few places in Scripture to remember that.

The Greek word for "gift" refers to an act of divine generosity that is bestowed on believers. God has been generous with us. God has been gracious to us. God has given to us in a way that we did not deserve, in a way that shows his kindness and displays it to us in remarkable ways. And we've often said, for those of you that are visiting with us, I often say things like this from the pulpit, we are so conditioned, our carnal natures, the remnants of our sinful flesh are tempted to think about God in an entirely wrong way. People think about him as somebody who is hard to please, difficult to get along with, somebody that you have to do things in order to try to get him to be favorable to you. Scriptural reality in Christ is something completely different. It's the exact opposite of that. What we see when we look at what God has done for us in Christ is we see this completely generous, kind, loving, merciful God giving to us, handing over possession of infinitely valuable things to us that they might be ours and that we might share them in Christ and share them in Christ together. And I want to just look at four gifts that accompany our salvation here this evening and we'll just go through these very briefly.

First of all, we want to look at the gift of justification. The gift of justification and justification is at the heart of our salvation in Christ, and without trying to be too

technical tonight in our theology, justification means this, it means that for the believer in Christ, God forgives all of our sins and he accepts us as righteous for the sake of Christ. Now that's something that we don't deserve. It's something that we haven't earned. You cannot earn that kind of position before God. It's something that he has graciously given to us. In our sins, we have forfeited any claim on God, we have earned title to divine judgment, but when God moves in a heart, when God brings someone under the sound of the Gospel, when the Holy Spirit opens a heart to believe in Jesus Christ, God bestows the gift of justification upon them and what it means is that God no longer holds your sins against you and in place of that, in place of judgment, he has brought you to a place of divine favor, of divine acceptance. He accepts you as though you were as righteous as Jesus Christ himself is. That is amazing. That is not something that anybody deserves or could ever earn. You see, my friends, it's a gift. It's God giving something out of his bounty to us that is not what we have earned.

Now during his earthly life, Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the law of God, and when a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, receives Christ by faith alone, God counts the obedience of Christ in favor of the one who has believed. In other words, God treats you and God accepts you in the act of justification, God accepts you as though you had lived the perfect life of Christ. He accepts you on the basis of what his Son has done, not on the basis of the way that you have lived, and that becomes the foundation of our relationship with him. It is a gift and so God accepts us as righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Now there's another side to justification. You say, "Well, what about my sin? We're all sinners. You know, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none that's righteous, no, not one. In the Old Testament it says that insanity has filled the hearts of men continually. What about that aspect of our existence?" Well, Scripture says that at the cross what we're remembering with these elements in a moment, that Christ paid for all of that sin on our behalf and it works like this: God treated Christ like Christ had committed all of your sins and punished him at the cross for your sin. Jesus stood in your place in his death and accepted the punishments that God has for sinners in his own body. And what God did with Christ at the cross, assigned that guilt to Christ and punished him as if he had done it, and so there is this great exchange that has taken place in justification. Christ was treated as if he had lived your guilty life and God punished him for it so that the result is that God could treat you as if you had lived the perfect life of Christ instead. Christ is treated as though he lived your life, full of its guilt and shame, punished for it publicly, openly, infinitely, and you're treated as though you had lived a life of perfect obedience because the righteousness of Christ is treated to your account. For any thinking person, that sounds too good to be true. That just seems beyond human measure because we don't deal with each other that way. That's not how the world works. If you want money, you work for it. If you want something, you have to earn it. People deal with love and relationships that way, don't they? You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. That's kind of the way it works. Here we have an utter reversal of God treating guilty sinners in a way that they don't deserve, treating Christ in a way that he doesn't deserve so that this kind of blessing can be ours in Christ.

Look at Romans 3:24 with all those thoughts in mind. Romans 3:21, we see that this justification is a gift. It's something that's handed over to us without cost to us. Romans 3:21,

21 ... now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [here it is, look at verse 24] 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

This justification is a gift. God has handed over to believers the legal possession of the righteousness of Christ so that it is ours to be the basis upon which he deals with us forever. And beloved, just to repeat myself, just to be very clear, you did not earn that. You do not deserve that. This was a gift from God to you if you are a Christian here this evening. This is God giving something to you to show his benevolence, to show his friendship, to show his goodness, to bring you into his family. This is an act of love, a gift of love that is beyond human comprehension. It's the gift of justification that belongs to those who are in Christ.

Well, there's a second aspect. It's not only the gift of justification, there is the gift of the Holy Spirit that belongs to believers as well and for that, let's turn to John 14, if you will. John 14:16. I love the nouns and the verbs in these things that we are considering here this evening. The word of God, the written word of God and the Incarnate Word of God are treasures beyond our ability to measure, a treasure beyond measure is what we have in Christ and in his word. John 14:16, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and he says,

16 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Now Jesus is speaking these words on the eve of his crucifixion. His disciples have walked with him as their teacher, as their Master for a good three years and they had come to depend upon his presence, and Jesus knew that he was about to depart and that his subsequent physical absence from them would create a void in their lives that needed to be filled. They would be lost without their teacher and Jesus understands that and he assures them that though he is leaving, he is not going to leave them alone. They are not going to be left as orphans and what he says is that the Father will give you a helper. He's referring to the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell believers at the moment of their conversion. So each one of us here tonight who are true believers in Christ, have the indwelling presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are joined together with Christ by the third person of the Blessed Trinity. God dwells within each believer in the person of the Holy Spirit and Jesus says the Father will give that to you. This is another dispensation of kindness from God, giving us a reality, giving us his

presence in a way that we do not deserve, that we could not have asked for, that we could not have made happen. This is God transferring, as it were, the presence of the Holy Spirit because it would be good for us, that it is necessary for us and that's what God does for every true believer in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within them.

Look at Romans 8:9 with me, if you will. Romans 8:9. This is a reality for every true Christian. The Bible does not accept the premise that a person can be saved and not have the Holy Spirit. It does not accept the premise that you can be saved and then you have to get the Holy Spirit later. Do you realize what that would mean? That would mean that God didn't give us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ when we were converted. There's a whole system of theology that is wrongheaded on that very point. And it says in Romans 8:9, it says,

9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Beloved, do you see it? Every believer is on the receiving end of this gift of the Holy Spirit and the word "gift" is used there, the verb "give" is used there, this is what God has given in love to us.

So what does that mean for us in a practical level? What does it mean for the exercise of our Christian life that the Holy Spirit is with us? What does he do for us? Well, the Spirit gives understanding to our minds so that we can comprehend the truth of God's word. He gives us internal strength. He gives us comfort as we go through life that we might be able to obey God and trust him. We're not left to our own spiritual resources. We have the Spirit of God within us whose ministry is to strengthen us and to help us and to enable us to live this life that God has called us to. The Spirit of God reminds us faithfully of Jesus Christ and his love for us. Do you realize that even tonight we are under the ministry of the Holy Spirit to us? Christ appointed communion as a means to remember him by and the Spirit of God comes and helps us appreciate the significance of this so that when we leave this room tonight, that we would have a greater conscious sense of the love of God for our souls, of how good he has been to us, how generous and kind he has been to us. All of this a work of the Holy Spirit as he gives us understanding and expands our hearts to be able to embrace that and respond in gratitude and praise to God as a result. That's a gift.

What does the Scripture say? Turn back out a few pages to Romans 5, or if you're using a device, scroll up to Romans 5, I guess. But Scripture tells us that that Holy Spirit is a gift from God. In Romans 5:5 it says,

5 ... hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was [what?] given to us.

He was given to us without cost. We didn't have to pay for it. You might remember that there was a man in the book of Acts who saw the power that the apostles had and he offered them money so that he would have that same power and the apostle said, "Put your money away and may God forgive you of your awful sin of thinking that you could buy the Holy Spirit with your resources." It doesn't work that way. The Holy Spirit isn't for sale. He's given to us by a gracious God in our salvation.

So we have a gift of justification, a graciously granted legal status with God that gives us our title deed to heaven. We have the Holy Spirit in the meantime to indwell us. Thirdly, Scripture speaks about the gift of eternal life. The gift of eternal life. Now there's a lot of different ways that we could discuss eternal life. Jesus said to know him was to know God and that is eternal life, to know the one true God, but let's look at it from this perspective here this evening and I just know that I need to hear this, you need to hear this too; this is a great encouragement for those of us that are dealing with affliction and adversity here this evening of different kinds. Your salvation is Christ is about so much more than what happens to you in your earthly life. Your salvation is about so much more than what's happening today. It utterly transcends that to an infinite degree and I know, I know that we are all bent toward being consumed with what's happening today. We're bent that way because it's what's affecting us now, it's what we see and hear and touch and feel, it's what's happening now. So it's very understandable that these things affect us but when we step back from the day-to-day nature of existence and remember what we have in Christ and what God has done for us and what the purpose of salvation is, then all of a sudden we realize that we have received a gift the value of which is completely independent of what's happening to us today and that's a wonderful encouragement.

You see, my brother, you see, my sister in Christ, you were saved so that you would be with Christ throughout all of eternity. It's not just that he would be with you in your earthly trials and kind of smooth out the bumps of life. Well, for some of us he doesn't smooth out the bumps, he doesn't take us out of the valley when we would like. He leaves us there but it's not that he leaves us there alone, he says, "I'm with you in the valley." Psalm 23, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." That's from Matthew 28. Psalm 23, "I fear no evil for You are with me." And the point is that you are saved to be with Christ throughout eternity. Beloved, your salvation that you have today if you are a Christian is a down payment and, in one sense, a down payment on much better things, far better things, far greater things to come throughout all of eternity. You have the gift of eternal life.

Look at Romans 6 with me, at the end of the chapter there in verse 23. Romans 6:23,

23 ... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A free gift. A free gift. A free gift. Justification, a free gift. The Holy Spirit, a free gift. Eternal life, a free gift. Do you start to see the theme? Do you start to see how consistently Scripture speaks about the many aspects of our salvation in these kind of terms? It teaches us, beloved, it teaches us to sacrifice our sense of self-righteousness. It teaches us not to trust in our own righteousness for our standing with God because everything about Scripture says this is about what God gives. This is not what we earn, we can't earn it. The wages of what we deserve is death, what God has given us in Christ is a free gift of eternal life.

Do you know what it seems to me that our response to that is? It's one of adoring worship. It's one of infinite gratitude. It's one of profound sense of humility because you just want to cry out if you know anything about the nature of your own life and your own heart and the wicked motions that go on in your own heart, you want to say, "Wait, God, time out. I don't deserve all of this! You're being far too good to me!" To which the response of Scripture is that's precisely the point. It's a gift. It's a kind act from God, giving over something that you have not earned that you might possess it and possess it eternally. Wow. This God must be really really good. He must be really really kind. He must be far greater than our narrow conception of him often leads us to think about him. We think of him as someone grumpy and hard to please at times or, "Why do You do this? Why do I have to suffer like this?" While right in front of us is the Scriptures displaying for us the kindness of God in giving us this infinite multifaceted gift.

You could sum it up all this way in our fourth point here this evening and just refer to it as the gift of salvation. The gift of salvation and salvation kind of being a broad comprehensive term that includes everything that we've said here tonight about justification, eternal life and the Holy Spirit, and just an expansive term that just sums it all up and for this I would invite you to turn to the book of Ephesians, if you will. In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul in the first chapter in particular describes the work of the Trinity in salvation, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. The Son, Jesus Christ, accomplished redemption with his shed blood. The Holy Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance. That's all found in verses 3 through 14 and there is this great triune work of God in our salvation. All we're saying tonight is this, is that you and I, we were dead in our trespasses and sins and yet God made us alive in Christ.

Look at chapter 2, verse 1. Lest there be any question that we somehow earn this or we're entitled to it, oh, it was just the opposite, beloved. Ephesians 2:1,

1 ... you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Rightfully on the receiving end of the wrath of God because of our guilt and rebellion against him, every one of us, every one of you. This is what you were like and if you're not in Christ, this is what you are like here tonight. But what does Scriptures say as it talks to believers? It goes on, look at it in verse 4,

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come [throughout all of eternity] He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Wonderful things. And Paul sums it up in those most familiar words that follow. Look at it with me.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is [what?] it is the gift of God;

This great magnificent salvation which delivered you from the guilt and tyranny of sin in your life, which delivered you from the domination of Satan in your life, Scripture says Satan has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, which delivered you from the wrath of God, all of these things that you had no power to change, you didn't even have the power or the ability to believe in Christ on your own, Scripture says God did a work in you, God made you alive together in Christ, God imparted everything that was necessary for you to believe in Christ and be saved. And Paul when he's summarizing it all says, this was not of you, this was a gift from God. A gift. Something given to show friendship, affection or support. A gift which turned over the possession of something to you without cost. A gift that showed divine generosity to everyone who believes in Christ.

Do you know what one of the many wonderful things of this is, it just occurs to me to say this now in the moment, I guess, is the fact that the youngest, most humble, most obscure believer has equal possession to all of these riches as much as the most prominent Christian in the world does. You who are the newest believer in Christ have the same title to all of these riches that someone like John MacArthur does. He's no closer to God in the ways that we're talking about than you are because God has given this all to us and he has given it to all of us in Christ, to every one of us he's given every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. It's magnificent. It is wonderful.

So we see that ultimately salvation is the free gift of Christ to us. You see, and just to kind of wrap all of this up and to summarize it all, is that all of these things come to us in Christ. We don't think about justification apart from Christ or salvation apart from Christ. Ultimately your salvation is about the fact that God gave Christ to you and Christ gave himself for you when he suffered on the cross in what we're going to remember as we share the elements in just a moment. You remember John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He," what? Gave. Do you get it? This is all over Scripture, isn't it? It's remarkable. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in

Him should not perish but have eternal life." The point of the gift is that you would live forever in a place of perfect blessedness with your Savior and it's a gift, and beloved, if he gave Christ to us, he's not going to hold anything else back from us. You don't need to turn there, actually you do, Romans 8:32. Romans 8:32,

32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all,
how will He not also with Him freely [what, what does it say?] give us all
things?

So beloved, in Christ God has freely forgiven you of every sin that you've ever committed. In Christ God has freely given to you everything that is necessary to complete his purpose in saving you. It is a free gift received by faith. You do not deserve it. You do not work for it. And beloved, here's the point, this is the climax of it all is that such magnificent riches in Christ freely given to you show beyond any shadow of doubt the depth of love that God has for those who receive his Son. If you are in Christ tonight, whatever else is happening in your life, you can walk out of this room tonight with a deep deep assurance that God has loved you and that God does love you and that God will continue loving you because Christ has secured all of this for you on your behalf. Today we remember in this moment that's just ahead as we receive the elements, we remember the price that Christ paid for that gift. We say that it's a free gift and that's very true from our perspective, just remember from Christ's perspective it was very costly. It was the cost of his life. It was the cost of his suffering on the cross on our behalf. Jesus Christ who is God in human flesh suffered on the cross of Calvary 2,000 years ago. He offered his life to pay for the sins of his people as a sacrifice to his Father to satisfy the righteous wrath of God against us, and the resurrection of Christ proves that God accepted that sacrifice.

Now beloved, let me just say a final word here, is I've spoken of these things freely as speaking to brothers and sisters in Christ, and those of you that are in Christ, all of these riches are yours. I would just say a word to those of you that are here and you are not in Christ, you're not a Christian, you need to come to Christ in order to receive this gift. It's received by faith alone. It's received without cost. Isaiah 55:1 says, "Come freely and drink of the waters of life," words to that effect. But you have to come to Christ. It's just not bestowed on everyone. It's a gift for those who believe. And I invite those of you that have been cold toward Christ, that have been indifferent to these things, I invite you and I plead with you on this night of all nights, on the night that we call Christmas Eve, to come to Christ and be saved and respond to him in a way that is fitting for the way that he has given himself for sinners just like you. That's the only appropriate response.

Now the bread that we're about to receive reminds us of his body, the cup reminds us of his shed blood. We're a church that practices what you could call open communion, I guess, and what open communion means is that we freely invite every true believer in Christ to share in these elements. You do not have to be a member of Truth Community Church to share in the communion table with us but you do need to belong to Christ. If you are a Christian and you are not harboring known sin in your life, we invite you to share in these elements. If you're not a Christian, we ask you to respect the elements

enough to let them pass, to not pretend outwardly to belong to Christ when inwardly you are refusing his Lordship over you. So please pass on the elements if you're not a Christian. This table is for the people who have received the gift of which we've been speaking here tonight.

Our Father, we thank You for the immeasurable nature of Your gracious giving to us in Christ. We thank You for the gift of Jesus Christ. We thank You that He loved us and gave Himself up for us, gave Himself up for me, the Apostle Paul could say in Galatians 2:20. So our heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Jesus Christ. We gladly remember Him and honor Him in this hour as we pray in His blessed name. Amen.

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